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## Poems

Mark O'Connor

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## Poems

### Abstract

PORT ESSINGTON (NT), MONSOON STORMS, PLAINS AND PYRAMIDS

12. Ibid., pp. 88-89.
13. Coe v. the Commonwealth of Australia and another, *Australian Law Reports*, vol. 24, 1979, pp. 118-138, p. 138.
14. Calder et al. v. the Attorney-General of British Columbia, *Dominion Law Reports*, vol. 34 (3rd series), 1973, pp. 145-226, p. 190.
15. Ibid., p. 169.
16. Guerin et al. v. the Queen, *Dominion Law Reports*, vol. 13 (4th series), 1984, pp. 321-369, p. 339.
17. Eddie Mabo and another v. the State of Queensland and another, 1988, F.C. 88/062 (High Court of Australia), p. 34. (Later published in *Commonwealth Law Reports*, vol. 166, p.186.)
18. Eddie Mabo and others v. the State of Queensland, 1992, F.C. 92/014 (later to be published in *Commonwealth Law Reports*), p. 1. All further references to this report are included in the text.

## Mark O'Connor

### PORT ESSINGTON (NT)\*

Nowhere is the sea so entrappppd by land,  
a smooth basin flooding and draining silently.  
Here the tailed, keeled reptile-shape is best.

Kunapipi, that old Snake-Lady,  
has swallowed an endless plain,  
spews back a third at each low tide.

This lace-coast, froth-land  
mixed with sea, sea patterned with land,  
tide country, crocodile-totem land,  
turns fresh-water floodplain, or salt-marsh  
as snows thicken or thin on Antarctica.  
An ocean with ripples in place of waves  
echoes and gurgles against clay cliffs.  
The air is a warm-mousse  
kiss, above soft waves friendly to the turtle  
and the bark-mat canoe with turned-up sides.  
In its shallows the stingray slides easily,

Landing,  
the sandhills are a slither of snake-trails  
stitched with tussocks, among dead-coral oddments  
like mouth-guards or pink plastic gums,  
scraps of sea-corset or abrasive lace.  
The sandcrab's eight-footed bunch-punch tracks  
swirl like octopus arms around the hole,  
a twirling border of bead-work.  
In a sparse perspicuous place  
the coiled death-adder jumps to view  
and the spinifex pigeon scratches  
its morning flourish on the ground  
– a land to be felt with the toes.

- \*) Port Essington in Australia's Northern Territory is the site of an attempted 19th-century European settlement, destroyed by malaria and cyclone a few years before the city of Darwin was founded.

## MONSOON STORMS

Thunder through Arnhem Land's  
worse than eroded lands...  
The gust-front hitting before the rain.

Flanked by icy outliers of cirrus,  
in the booming belly of the cloud  
the Kunapipi serpent thrashes,  
crackles a forked tongue down  
to favourite caves and valleys.

'That Old Lady', they call her,  
whose roar first let shamans guess  
how a god's love and anger could coexist.

Yes, but it's just electrons talking.  
The storm-cloud's advancing portico  
sharp as a cut-out with sun above  
is a fluffed, dynamic aerosol, electric ice  
with a high patina'd aura of subtracted shades,  
in reverse-rainbow colours, rare cyane and magenta  
as if oil had mixed with the pastels.

And skating above it,  
Australia's eagle with hoodless eyes  
that loves the sun and thunder mixed.

The rain's barrage moves in, gets our range;  
frogs crank up again; drops hiss  
on rocks still hot to touch.  
We watch the monsoon's first plumblines drop  
and the long weeks begin  
of the lightning's miles-in-a-millisecond.

After the cannons and retreating drums  
the shipwreck of a storm staggers  
away from the sunset  
blazing and howling into the East.

## PLAINS AND PYRAMIDS

The plain, a vast lawn of goose-mown grass,  
seems an old lake-bed – and is, from three months back.  
Its harvest, in spike-rush bulbs, exceeds a wheatfield.

Brindled geese and white herons move on it, placid as sheep.  
A distant flock rises and placidly glides  
to some new down.

Pelicans cross it on lazy wings, flap, flop, glide,  
– taking the beat from their leader.

In Jabiluka Billabong archer-fish glide  
at the surface, careless of herons.  
Their eye, that can see to shoot a midge,  
holds the sky and all of its beaks  
lightly in fish-eye crystal.

The floodplain bakes to splitting seedful mud  
where the Lightning Man will strike his axe  
and the Rainbow Serpent,  
blood-scenting dragon, resplendent monsoonal  
air-snake that upswims the rising mist,

will swirl hungrily to the fertile smell  
of a girl's first blood at puberty,  
swilling the land to mud-brick soup  
brimming with all fertility.

The white distant trunks and wet greens  
might be English but for the killing heat.  
- a wood surrounding a pleasant dale  
where knights joust from a line of trees.

Yet the plain has odd dips and gullies  
where half a host might hide - the goose camps.  
presided by the Lord Jabiru  
in red leggings and white plume-badges.

This was the Ice Age field of the Yam People

who drew themselves as pregnant tubers  
with plump distorted heads and legs  
10,000 years ago, on a high cold plateau.  
That same cold-drought begins  
afresh each winter, but the monsoon comes.

I think of another floodplain  
livened by seasonal floods  
where a black race mixed seed and language  
with a paler long-nosed one  
and built the pyramids.

There too the ibis and hawk were sacred;  
and the crocodile answered prayers.